

Opinion **Education**

Even a PhD isn't enough to erase the effects of class

A new study shows that it plays out differently to barriers based on race or gender

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The past few years have been challenging for anyone employing fewer women or under-represented minorities than white men called John. Bosses responded, at least at first; according to jobs platform LinkedIn, the seventh fastest growing job title between 2019 and 2023 was “vice-president of diversity and inclusion”. And [within economics](#), concerns about maleness and paleness triggered a wave of new research.

A new [working paper](#) is part of that trend, though it suggests there should be another round of reflection. Anna Stansbury and Kyra Rodriguez of MIT look at the “class gap” among US PhD-holders in science, social science, engineering and health. One might hope that having “Dr” in front of one’s name would be enough to wash away any childhood disadvantage. But it seems not.

Academia might seem like a niche profession to study, and . . . yes it is. But it has the advantage that outcomes are quantifiable, with the top prize being tenure at a well-ranked university. And the authors argue that if academia has a problem, then other elite occupations where productivity is harder to measure and networking is even more important probably have it worse.

Stansbury and Rodriguez stratify their sample according to their parents’ education, looking for differences between first-generation college graduates and those whose parents had a non-PhD graduate degree (roughly a third each). They also compare those who got their PhDs from the same institution, in the same subject.

It turns out that those whose parents did not have a college degree are 13 per cent less likely to end up with tenure at a top university than those with more educated parents. They also tend to end up at lower-ranked institutions. So even after accounting for the possibility that disadvantaged scholars start off on a weaker footing, they still then do worse.

This class gap in professional success is about as big as those found by race and gender, but seems to operate differently. Perhaps surprisingly, there is no class gap in the rate at which people ditch academia, leaving the difference to play out entirely within the profession. Meanwhile women disproportionately drop out of academia, and under-represented minorities both disproportionately drop out and struggle while they are in.

What is going on? Perhaps there are differences in confidence, or the ease with which people can form the kinds of relationships that will get them ahead. Within academia there are lots of unwritten rules on how to progress. (For example, never underestimate the fragility of senior colleagues’ egos.)

There are some hints in the data. Disadvantaged economists appear to be a bit less productive than their more advantaged counterparts, though that only explains around a third of the gap in the kinds of places in which they get tenure. They are also less likely to get research grants, and are slightly more likely to co-author with others of a similar background.

Whatever is going on, it is also happening beyond the hallowed halls of universities. The authors find a class pay gap in the private sector (though not in government, where pay is probably more rigid), as well as a long-term difference in their chances of managing others. There's also a gulf in job satisfaction.

What of economics? It starts from a posher place than other academic subjects. [Earlier work](#) by Stansbury and a co-author finds that its PhD students have better educated parents than in any other academic discipline, including even classics or history of art. But in the more recent study there isn't a discernible difference in the class gap between fields, so economics may be no worse than the rest.

Definitions do seem to matter. A recent survey failed to find big differences between the treatment of academic economists split by their parents' education. But when dividing by parental income, there was a more obvious gap. Of those who grew up in upper middle class or high income households, 46 per cent said they felt intellectually included within the field, compared with 37 per cent who grew up in a low income family.

That drags us back to thorny questions about what class really is, whether parental income or education, or even something else. In America part of the challenge is that the concept doesn't seem to be as embedded in the national psyche as it is in Britain, the land where a cut-glass accent is a valuable asset. Whatever definition one uses, its effects deserve more scrutiny.

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